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LJ INFOTECH ONLINE DATABASES

BY CAROL TENOPIR

Internet Issues in Reference

MOST LIBRARIES no longer debate the question of whether or not to offer patron access to the Internet. They just do it. As early as 18 months ago, more than 77 percent of university libraries, 84 percent of large public libraries (defined here as those with more than \$5 million in operating expenses), and 21 percent of all public libraries provided Internet access to patrons. These numbers are almost certainly higher now. *Library Journal's* Internet column debuted in 1993. *American Libraries* followed suit this year. Even Doonesbury ran a series of cartoons showing homeless public library patrons accessing the Library of Congress through the library's Internet service.

A 1994 report sponsored by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) found that a vast majority of public librarians agree that public libraries: 1) should provide Internet access to patrons; 2) should serve as a safety net for public access to the Internet; 3) should provide Internet access without charge to patrons; and that 4) future monetary support of public libraries is integrally linked to the development of the Internet.

Libraries that limited online services because they felt traditional online services such as DIALOG or LEXIS/NEXIS were too expensive or inappropriate for their clientele now can have a visible online presence. Many libraries are building homepages or linking their catalogs with Internet graphical user interfaces to provide attractive, customized access to the many resources available over the Internet.

Questions remain

However, just because libraries are convinced they should provide Internet

access doesn't mean they've resolved every Internet-related issue. Librarians are struggling with issues and debating whether to impose rules and set policies on a service that lends itself to rampant experimentation and creative anarchy.

A colleague and I interviewed almost two dozen university librarians in 1994 to discover what impact their Internet connections were having on their library reference services.

Traffic congestion

Workstation use in libraries often resembles vehicular traffic on popular thoroughfares. When traffic gets too heavy on a two-lane highway, the traffic department is likely to study the number of cars on the road at rush hour. Traffic officials may decide that widening the road to four lanes will solve the congestion. After the project is completed, more people discover the wider road. Officials initially recommended four lanes, but now six are needed to handle the current level of traffic.

The universities where we conducted our interviews had between two and 100-plus workstations providing patron access to the Internet in the library, in addition to dial-up access. No matter how many workstations and dial-up ports a library plans, more will likely be needed as the word spreads and the popularity of online service increases. Librarians are taking a variety of approaches to solve the problem.

Some libraries have sign-up sheets for busy times or employ reference staff who serve as traffic cops, asking patrons who have parked too long at a workstation to yield to others who are waiting. One library requires sign-up for 16 of its 18 clustered workstations but reserves two others as "Express" stations. The Express stations do not require a sign-up but can only be used for a few minutes at a time on a first-come, first-served basis.

Not all staff members feel comfortable playing the traffic cop role. According to Marty Courtois, biological sciences reference librarian at the University of Tennessee, "[we have] tried just keeping an informal eye on station

use, and at those times when all the stations are in use, asking those who are not engaged in research activities to leave. Most of the time this works, but we do get some nasty looks, and not all the reference desk staff are willing to confront users this way."

Fun and games

Much of the congestion can be attributed to uses that may seem frivolous or inappropriate in the library. At the University of Tennessee library, we had an explosion of people using the stations this past summer to access 'MUDs,' 'MOOs,' and 'chat' resources." MUDs ("multiuser dungeons") are interactive virtual games. MOOs ("multiuser object oriented") are text-based multiuser virtual places that can be used for games or other interactive functions. "We expect this activity to become even more popular in the fall and to become a real problem in that folks using the stations for recreational purposes will prevent those who need to use the library sources from getting access to a station."

Sending and receiving E-mail is another activity that takes up lots of time. E-mail is one of the most popular and time-consuming activities in all types of libraries. "The vast majority [of users] at any given time use the Internet for E-mail," said one academic librarian. "In fact, it has become a serious problem for those users who wish to use workstations for research purposes."

Libraries are instituting a variety of solutions. Gretchen McCord Hoffman, coordinator of library instruction, said the University of Houston has "written and posted a policy stating that the primary purpose of our electronic service is to do library-related research." It is the responsibility of the "floating" reference staff "to point out the policy to patrons using the machines for recreational purposes. There are other labs on campus where they can go for these activities."

Tennessee librarians said they are considering "posting a sign at each station informing users that the machines are there to provide access to information sources for research and study, not



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for games and recreation." This corresponds with the strict "no computer games" policy of the university computer center. University computer resources are not to be used for games, and students can be ejected from computer labs if they are caught playing games.

In one academic library "as a matter of policy, we do not allow users to access E-mail from library terminals There is a computer lab . . . which those of us in the main library can refer people to for things such as E-mail." A public library may not have the luxury of sending people to other places.

Tom Myers, manager of the Learning Resource Center for Laplaza Telecommunity/University of New Mexico

sophical problem. Public librarians, in particular, may feel it is not their place to dictate type of use. Some fear such restrictions border on censorship, hesitating to judge what is appropriate or inappropriate use. Others point out the benefits users can obtain from fun and games on the Internet.

Many libraries are solving the problem by guiding use rather than restricting it. Since much of the "serious" library research is done on databases mounted on the library's own computer, CD-ROM network, or library catalog, some libraries just don't provide access to the Internet on workstations that access these resources. The separate Internet workstations can be used for any

Libraries are struggling with whether they should implement policies prohibiting access to sexually explicit materials over the net and with how to absolve themselves of any legal liability if patrons ignore that policy.

Sexually explicit images on a screen in a public area in clear view of other patrons could lead to public outcry, and possibly a sexual harassment complaint. The library staff at the University of Houston has "discussed the fact that if another patron complains about someone viewing pornography, this is sufficient reason to ask them to stop."

If the 1995 Telecommunications Bill and the Exon (so-called "decency") Amendment become law, every carrier through which "indecent" material travels will be equally responsible for upholding broadly interpreted anti-obscenity laws. Does this include the library that receives the material on behalf of the patron? Perhaps.

Houston's Hoffman makes this impassioned plea:

with so much potential for serious legal problems and so very little law of any kind (legislative or case) to guide us, we are just begging for it if we don't start doing something about it. Every library that offers Internet access to their patrons and/or staff should be talking to their lawyers if they haven't already. We need to be setting policies which are as legally sound as possible at the moment to protect ourselves, our patrons' rights, and our institutions. And we need to make our institutions and their legal counsel aware of the possibilities. On a larger front, *we need to be working with our legislators to educate them about these issues.*

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Restricting type of computer use is not only difficult to enforce, it is a philosophical problem.

Public librarians, in particular, may feel it is not their place to dictate type of use. Some fear such restrictions border on censorship

at Taos Library, has to balance the needs of a library that is part public, part academic. "Our regular users [this summer] were a group of high school students who came in and spent hours MUD-ing—participating in a 'Dungeons and Dragons'-type game, which has participants all over the world."

Instead of written rules, the Laplaza LRC relies on courtesy: "They know that if someone needs to use a particular computer that they will be asked to move to another computer, and do so willingly, because they have been instructed that other people need to use the LRC for research band access to the net. The basis for use of the LRC is consideration of other people's needs and balancing those needs against other users' needs. We have yet to create a set of 'rules,' mostly because the present system works, but as that evolves, so will the need to create guidelines. Only if they fail will we resort to rules."

Philosophical problem

Restricting by type of use is not only difficult to enforce, it is a philo-

sophical problem. Public librarians, in particular, may feel it is not their place to dictate type of use. Some fear such restrictions border on censorship, hesitating to judge what is appropriate or inappropriate use. Others point out the benefits users can obtain from fun and games on the Internet.

Having separate workstations may be a simple solution, but it goes against the trend of integrated information services with common interfaces that guide users to a variety of CD-ROM, in-house, online, and Internet-reachable resources. A more sophisticated way to guide use is to point to selected sources from a main menu or to provide links on a library homepage. Carefully designed menus or homepages don't necessarily prohibit unwanted use, rather they encourage more serious functions by making them easily accessible. One librarian told us, "it is not apparent to the user that they are in fact using the Internet. These choices have been listed on menus along with the libraries' CD-ROM network."

Pornography

Certain kinds of materials on the Internet may force libraries to consider legal issues in addition to philosophical ones. Pornography over the Internet in particular is a loaded issue right now.